



2024 AIA Engagement Guidance for Architects and Clients

Architecture practice and client expectations have evolved significantly since standards for procurement and valuation of design services were initially established. AIA is offering this guidance to help architects and clients adopt a simplified approach to the selection of an architecture firm, with the intention of conserving resources and improving outcomes for all stakeholders in the process.

This guidance is designed to inform both owners and architects of the challenges faced by their potential partners in the procurement process. When architects are engaged by potential clients as a new business partner would be, the final outcome will benefit significantly. Some current engagement practices harm the interests of architects and clients because of unclear expectations and insufficient compensation for work prior to the selection of an architect.

This document provides an overview of best practices that architects and clients should consider as they approach new project engagements.

Guidance for architects:

1. Research clients that contact you directly to obtain a proposal for design services. Confirm that the opportunity is viable and that the client has a proven history of success. Inquire about the feasibility of the project from the onset. Determine whether it is fully capitalized, or where the client is in the funding process. Have a keen understanding of what other firms are submitting. If specific firm names cannot be shared, inquire what types and total number of firms are participating. This information allows you to evaluate the probability of success before embarking on a potentially long process. If the client is new to the design process, ensure that they receive resources from AIA that will help them engage with your firm effectively.
2. When considering a publicly advertised procurement opportunity, ensure that the requirements to be evaluated for shortlisting are limited. A cover letter and a page-limited qualifications package is usually sufficient for an opportunity where several firms will be pursuing work with a single client for a given opportunity. Additional effort should

be allocated to the process upon shortlisting, but limit the time spent on the entire process to manage your own risk.

3. When developing a fee proposal, always ensure that your business costs are covered, and you include a responsible level of profitability. Otherwise, you are doing a disservice to your business, devaluing architectural services in general, and increasing your firm's liability risk. You will more than likely under-perform for your client by the end of the project, which not only impacts the client's goals, but may also compromise the built environment and do a disservice to the public. Charging deflated fees is unethical. Rely on AIA resources around fee calculations to ensure that your fee proposals are realistic.

4. Do not perform design work for zero cost in the pursuit phase. This also drives down the value of design services. While reasonable marketing costs are to be expected, be careful to limit the resources allocated to a pursuit to limit your exposure and be a good steward of your firm's resources.

5. Ask clarifying questions when certain aspects of the opportunity are unclear. As architects, a significant portion of your time may be attached to this project, so it is imperative that you also have a level of confidence in what you will be designing and for what type of client. Vetting the clients, asking for more information, and requesting a debrief after the selection has been made are all important parts of the process.

6. Before beginning the design of a new project, establish equitable contract terms and have a thorough discussion with your client about the project budget and contingency reserves for unforeseen changes. It may help to refer to the *Project Planning Guide* created by AIA, the Construction Owners Association of America (COAA), and other industry sponsors.

Guidance for clients:

1. Clearly define your scope of work and the expectations that you have of your architecture partner for the project that you are presenting for consideration. Before you begin a formal selection process, talk informally with architects about your project goals and their services.

2. Consider a multi-phase procurement process that may begin with requesting high-level qualifications from architecture firms, limited to about 10 pages, to receive concise responses and protect your time in the review process. Limit the number of firms on your "shortlist" for further consideration.

Upon selection of shortlisted firms from the qualifications phase, consider scheduling 30-60-minute interviews and determine whether or not to further reduce the list prior to requesting a more substantial proposal. (It is best to provide at least 30 days' notice and ensure that the due date is reasonably distant from all major holidays and ideally set for

a Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday.) Also, consider a page limit to reduce the review time for your team. Upon determining a final shortlist, notify the teams of their status and schedule any further interviews with the same guidelines. Aim to make a final decision within 1-2 weeks and notify all parties of their status once a decision has been made.

3. When interested in gaining a better understanding of how design firms will respond to your project goals, you may consider engaging in a paid design competition. Generally, the qualifications of a firm should provide a sense of their capabilities, but if a customized solution would provide you with greater comfort with the selection, ensure that you allocate funds to pay for the time that all participating firms will spend in generating customized design proposals.

4. When fees are a critical factor in selection of an architect for your project, it may be advantageous to request a fee range from several firms on your list in lieu of embarking upon a more formal multi-phase selection process. Once you receive the fee ranges, you may feel more comfortable in proceeding with a selection process, or you may reconsider the parameters of the project until the proposed fees align with your anticipated budget.

5. Once a firm is selected, ensure that the contract articulates all expectations for the project and that its terms are consistent with the architecture firm's liability insurance coverage.

6. Before design begins, talk with your architect in detail about your project budget and prudent contingencies to reserve for unforeseen changes. It may help to refer to the *Project Planning Guide* published by AIA with the Construction Owners Association of America (COAA) and other industry sponsors.

Created by the AIA Prosperity Committee (v3 October 22, 2024)

For additional context on this work, please refer to ***Advancing Prosperity for Architects***.